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ABSTRACT

Although prison inmates in Canada can choose education as a regular activity during their incarceration, only about 20% of the 9,500 inmates in federal penitentiaries are enrolled in educational programs. This may be due to the variation in the types and quality of programs available; problems of security, transfer policies, variations of protective custody, and rigid daily schedules; and problems of maintaining teaching quality and student motivation. To realize the potential of penitentiary education, a revitalization is necessary, and the community college is the most appropriate institution to become involved. However, certain conditions are recommended: (1) a single college should contract with a particular correctional institution over an extended period; (2) highly skilled, creative teachers with a deep understanding of and interest in prison schools and inmate students should be hired under three-year contracts; (3) colleges should provide academic and vocational assessment, diagnostic and remedial programs, and language and life skills training; (4) colleges should also offer individualized packaged courses, through a variety of media, to inmates who lack access to regular prison education; and (5) colleges should extend their curricula in other dimensions of corrections, such as para-legal studies, law enforcement, and training programs for custodial staff, sheriffs, and probation officers. (AYC)

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Penitentiary Education in Canada

- The Role for Community Colleges -

by

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Penitentiary Education in Canada

- The Role for Community Colleges -

In 1976, a parliamentary sub-committee[1] was constituted to examine in detail the conditions prevailing in federal penitentiaries, and to make recommendations to the Parliament of Canada on future priorities and directions within the System. The sub-committee had been formed in reaction to a number of serious incidents in maximum security institutions during the previous three years.

In 1977, the Report of this Committee[2] was tabled in the House of Commons. Inter alia, the Report commented upon matters related to education and training in the penitentiaries and noted the need for both greater quantity and quality in such programs. Moreover, the Report reiterated the view that education was equivalent to work and inmates should be able to choose education as a regular activity during their period of incarceration.

The previous reference restates an important principle with respect to inmate behavior in the penitentiary system. It means that education and training may be selected voluntarily over the other two options, institutional maintenance and work in industrial shops, without prejudice and with equivalent rewards in terms of pay. Clearly, this is an expli-

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[1] The Sub-Committee on the Penitentiary System in Canada of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs.

[2] Report of the Sub-Committee, ibid.

cit recognition of the potential value of education and training for those who are persuaded that they would benefit from the experience.

At the present time only about twenty percent of the 9500 inmates in federal penitentiaries are enrolled in educational programs. There are several factors which could contribute to this modest degree of participation and, in delineating such factors, it is possible to identify many of the ongoing problems which lie at the roots of the Canadian Corrections System.

In the first place, the variety and quality of programs vary enormously across the country. Education is within provincial jurisdiction and the penitentiary system, as a federal agency, depends upon provincial cooperation in the granting of credentials, and to a large extent, the conditions under which teachers are employed. The recognition of penitentiary based apprenticeship training by the appropriate bodies in each province has been a consistent problem which defies easy solution. University education, as a regular program, is available only in two institutions in British Columbia.[3] It is fair to say that there are a number of exceptional programs in vocational, academic and cultural areas which are available within the system, but they are sparsely located. In some institutions no educational programs are offered.

Secondly, although education is viewed as high priority by penitentiary administrators, there are factors which create practical problems. Obviously, security will take precedence over other considerations and, in some respects, educational and training settings may be perceived as potential problems for security. While this view is appreciated,

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[3] British Columbia Penitentiary and Matsqui Penitentiary

security may have either of two faces, a static and a dynamic. Education and training can be integrated into a system of dynamic security. Rarely have incidents of prison violence occurred in the school setting. Other practical problems of penitentiary operation such as transfer policies, varieties of protective custody and rigid daily schedules, are often antithetical to planned, consistent educational programs.

Finally, penitentiary education is beset by problems similar to those found in more conventional settings. Teachers lose vitality and imagination, particularly in the stressful conditions which prevail in prisons. Inmate students lose motivation and become lethargic and uncooperative, standards deteriorate and morale is lowered. Vocational programs, in particular, became outdated and inmates recognize that many of the skills learned in such programs have little application in the outside world. In addition to obsolete equipment, the physical locations in which training occurs are often crowded and substandard.

It is evident that if penitentiary education is to realize the potential values which are promised, a revitalization is necessary. New approaches to curriculum, to teacher selection and to program evaluation are urgently needed. All of the foregoing have serious financial implications, but the current expenditure of only four percent of the CCS budget upon education is hardly out of proportion to its contribution.

Any study of the history of federal corrections in Canada leads to one generalized conclusion. Despite numerous reports, changes in policy and practice, and considerable expenditure of public money, there have been few successes as far as inmate rehabilitation and overt behavior

change[4] are concerned. The punitive approach seemed to produce little effect. Similarly, the medical model, which assumed that inmates were mentally and emotionally disturbed, showed results of limited value. Even the generalization that criminal behavior was a product of deprived environments and, presumably, that change of environment would produce change of behavior, seemed to have little effect. It is not unusual at the present time to hear highly vocal arguments in favor of a return to a "hard line" approach in corrections. Such arguments seem as much associated with a current trend towards conservatism as an expression of frustration with the practices of the past.

The extent to which education and training has been utilized as a systematic, universally accepted approach to inmate behavior change is open to conjecture. Certainly, the small percentage of the penitentiary budget devoted to education and the limited facilities, personnel and degree of inmate involvement suggest a less than total commitment from the Canadian Corrections Service. While reactions from inmates now in programs are mixed it is apparent that, for many, education offers the only source of genuine intellectual stimulation and the best hope for significant behavioral change.

Irrespective of the practices of the past it is apparent that the service is now ready to consider, even welcome, new initiatives and new approaches to penitentiary education.

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[4]For further discussion on this topic read J. Douglas Ayers Perspective on Education in Prisons, unpublished manuscript by Dr. Ayers, University of Victoria.

Two major reports[5] on the topic, one internal and one external to the system, have been submitted to the Solicitor-General. The external review contains recommendations which, if implemented, will give a new impetus to the role of education within the penitentiary system.

The Role for Community Colleges

The new focus for penitentiary education will derive from a number of principles. Both academic education and vocational training must involve far more than the acquisition of cognitive or psychomotor skills. Penitentiary education must be more than a device for occupying inmates' time in a productive environment. Education must supply the format for the development of new insights into an inmate's lifestyle, his attitudes, beliefs, values and feelings about himself, his life and the world around him. Such insights are not stimulated from preaching, coertion or moralizing. They come from honest discussion, debate and analysis utilizing the curriculum of the humanities, the social sciences and the life sciences. Nor is such learning restricted to the academic areas. An instructor in automotive mechanics may reinforce several behaviors. While developing manual skills in his students, he may

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[5] Phase I: Report to Reviewers,
Education and Training Division, Canadian Penitentiary Service,
August, 1978.
AND
Phase II: Report to the Solicitor-General concerning Education and Training Programs in the Canadian Corrections Service. O.I.S.E. Review Team, February, 1979.

produce an appreciation of excellence by his acceptance of nothing else. His speech, appearance, attitudes to work and living may create attittudinal changes in his students by associative learning.

Recognizing the potential scope in the curriculum of penitentiary education, which may range from basic literacy, high school completion, post-secondary studies, and a variety of technical and vocational programs, it is apparent that a much higher percentage of inmates than is currently the case can benefit from education and training. In addition, special programs such as English language training and the individual treatment of a variety of learning disabilities have been greatly underutilized.

To this date, community colleges have been involved to a limited extent in penitentiary education, with equally limited success. Generally the problems have stemmed from the conditions under which the colleges have been contracted, a lack of deep commitment by the colleges to penitentiary education and little continuity in their involvement.

Given the mandate of community colleges in most provinces to provide a broad comprehensive curriculum ranging from adult basic education to university level academic subjects and from short course vocational training to technology diplomas and apprenticeship credentials, they would appear to be the most appropriate of all educational institutions to become involved in penitentiary education. Most colleges have the capacity to mount new programs and phase them out when the need has been met.

However, if the difficulties of the past are to be avoided, certain conditions are necessary. Penitentiary teaching is demanding in the

challenges which it presents. It requires the efforts of the most highly skilled, creative teachers with a deep interest in and understanding of, prison schools and inmate students. Such teachers must be selected on agreement by the college and CCS, from the most competent of college faculty. Even then, a period of orientation to penitentiary education is needed before full time teaching commences. Such teachers will, in effect, be seconded from their institutions and able to return to college teaching after their penitentiary experience is over.

The physical and psychological conditions which prevail in prisons are such that teachers can spend only limited periods on such a task without losing much of their vitality and imagination. Hence contracts should be of three years in length, renewable if the circumstances warrant. Similarly, vocational instructors should be contracted from full time college faculty to provide programs which teach current skills for as long as the need exists.

Special services which colleges can provide to penitentiaries include sophisticated academic and vocational assessment, diagnostic and remedial programs for disadvantaged adults, language training, programs for native peoples and life skills. However, all such special courses should be offered under the same critical conditions as those outlined above.

From an organizational point of view it seems logical that a single college should contract with a particular correctional institution over an extended time period. Under these conditions the college can develop a commitment to penitentiary education and a specific

responsibility for the scope and emphasis of the curriculum. For example, the orientation of teachers could include controlled visits to the penitentiary and a gradual exposure to the conditions which prevail. Clearly, the role of the college is not simply course delivery, but extensive program development with an emphasis upon the broad philosophy of penitentiary education.

In turn, the inmate population will experience an "outside" view of education, the credibility of an external credential and an exposure to "regular" standards of academic performance. The community college has the potential to provide all educational and vocational programs to meet inmate needs, with the exception of the university degree.

One additional educational dimension which colleges can offer to correctional institutions is the delivery of individualized packaged courses, through a variety of media, to inmates who lack access and regular prison education as a result of their confinement in protective custody and special handling units. Many colleges have successfully developed such programs. No segment of the population is more in need of these opportunities than prison inmates in special custody.

It seems equally appropriate that while taking responsibility for education and training in nearby located penitentiaries, colleges can extend their curricula into other dimensions of corrections. Programs for training custodial staff, sheriffs, probation officers, para-legal studies and law enforcement all may be developed in concert with a broad commitment to penitentiary education. For such colleges which seek to explore new horizons within their mandate, corrections is one area which cries for attention.

In conclusion, it is important to re-emphasize that the time for community colleges to respond to these challenges has never been as critical as the present. But any initiative must incorporate a revitalized view of penitentiary education. It cannot be simply a delivery of academic and vocational programs, which are planned to develop cognitive and manual skills. Penitentiary education must be based on the assumption that inmates can benefit in the broadest sense from rigorous, quality programs and that learning will incorporate new insights into an inmate's lifestyle. Education must stimulate the imagination, expand the creative capacities, introduce the learner to new dimensions of work and living and expose him to the moral implications of alternative lifestyles. All of the foregoing is only possible with teachers who have a deep commitment to prison education and total understanding of their role.

Prison inmates are not physical aberrations, they are human beings whose lives, and views on life, are often distorted and irrational. Most have undistinguished educational histories and, in consequence, negative attitudes to schools and learning. Treated as normal students in abnormal environments, with reasonable expectation of performance, they have same potential for learning as more conventional adult learners. Certainly, there are major differences in penitentiary teaching by comparison with regular college teaching, but the essential ingredients of quality education - dedicated teachers, intellectual stimulation, and an atmosphere of productivity and progress, are identical!

It is time to stop simply the occupation of inmates' time in school classrooms and to try genuine education. The community colleges have a major role to play in the experiment.

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